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The Specialist Games And Gaming Business Magazine

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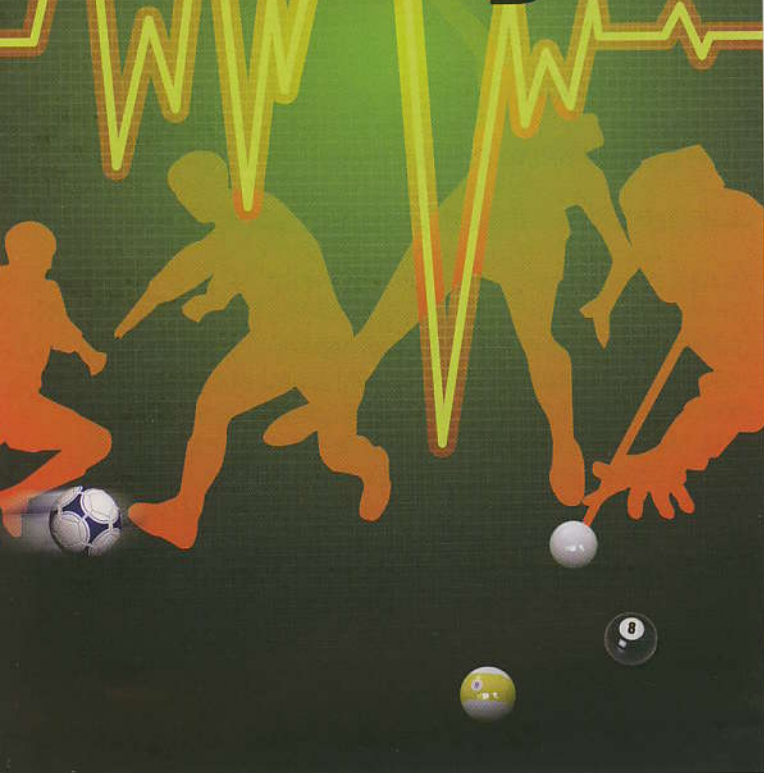
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NMi SPECIAL ISSUE



# Should coin-op sports games be healthy?



**Alex Lee posed the following question to a number of companies in the coin-op sector:**  
**"How responsible do game makers feel about the sports games they put out and their implications for players' health or are they just another way of filling the cash box? As sports games are inherently competitive, is the social element enough or should all kinds of games developers, manufacturers and distributors think 'health and physical fitness' first?" Here are the responses**

## **Steve Pope, vice president, Merlin Darts**

TO be honest, I have never discussed this topic with anyone in the industry. In my opinion, I don't think manufacturers can afford to be altruistic and not be mostly concerned about the cash box. Because, if the cash box is not healthy, no operator or location will buy the product. If the product does not sell well, you have wasted all your development money and cannot survive. This is not to say that there are not companies that specifically target health or higher goal game development (problem solving, bringing attention to social matters like starvation, etc.), but they seem to be in the minority.

Taking your example, those dance games appeared to be designed by the Asian game developers, as those kids like to jump around like nut balls. This was a great money making opportunity. I think it is really cute for kids to do, and it does support the 'arts' via dance. I think this is better than staring at a computer screen and shooting a creature with a plastic gun, etc.

If schools are using this to foster better health, that is great 'outside the box' thinking. However, I can almost guarantee that the developers were not targeting this application when they pitched the idea to their bosses.

By the same token, when a teacher decided to use a dartboard in her classroom, to help kids learn mathematics (addition and subtraction), it was most likely her idea to use a game to foster the overall goal. I doubt the local dart wholesaler pitched the idea to the school.

In summary, I don't think many game developers are thinking about fitness or even promoting social interaction. When Sega develops games where players can link up with headsets and chat via the internet while fighting battles in a joint game environment, it is to enhance the playing experience and make it more fun - and thus sell more games - not because they want kids to interact more.

Social interaction is the first thing lost when kids go indoors to play video games, as opposed to knocking on doors in their neighborhood and gathering a group of friends to play in the park. And, again in my opinion, the fact that so many parents allow their kids to be couch potatoes, playing video games, surfing the net or watching TV, instead of kicking them out of the house and forcing them to create their own fun and games is the heart of the problem.

Gaming, television and other less healthy options will always be around, but it is how parents allow these influences into their homes that affects the number of physical activities participated in.

**With thanks to Steve Pope and all at Merlin Darts**

## **Liam Barrett, sales manager, Sam Leisure**

IT'S difficult for anybody in this business to claim any kind of moral high ground, as by definition, coin-op products are there to first and foremost make money.

However, I have always felt that as far as entertainment and interaction goes, pool, air hockey and table soccer offer more value than say, a fruit machine. The games have a tangible element as well as the competitive

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aspect. The feel of the cue, the use of chalk, the banter with friends and opponents, the noise and spectacle of four players feverishly chasing a ball around a box with men fixed on sticks, the confusion and panic as a puck ricochets around a hockey table.

Comparing them to simulation games, however, is different. Both hands-on and simulated games offer competition and interaction and undoubted high

entertainment value. It's debatable if many contribute significantly to the physical health of the players; pacing around a pool table provides only marginally more exercise than sitting in front of a games console. But in a world where people shop, chat, receive their information, perform their work duties and generally view the world without leaving their chair or actually speaking to anyone, the social element to a sports game should not be underestimated.

It gets you out of the house.

In an industry where amusement seems to be diverging from the prizes, with the polarisation of exhibitors at ATEI next year, games manufacturers probably need to stick together. As with most things these days, once the technological genie is out of the bottle, there's no putting it back. Computer games have been with us some time now. Whether their content corrupts the mind and their sedentary nature destroys the body is something difficult to prove. But branding them harmful is like decrying the tabloid press for dumbing down the UK but still buying the News of the World because 'it has great sports coverage.' We get, largely, what we deserve, supply and demand. The better path is to use innovation to improve the product to allay such concerns. Increase tournament and multiplay, design games with physical elements and strive to stimulate the mind as well as entertain it. Kids are very discerning and thrive on challenge. That's the secret of a successful video game.

What Sam Leisure has found is that there is still a great appetite for table games. But the desire for more immediate gratification caused or simply reflected by the video game generation has led to a decline in traditional games requiring dedication and practice, such as snooker, billiards and bar billiards, and a rise in the fortunes of American pool. Sam is Europe's biggest manufacturer in the sector and we pride ourselves on the professional quality and credentials of our tables. But it's the style and playability that sells them. The Bison remains Europe's favourite bar table, arguably the biggest selling coin-op pool table in the world. It's a good-looking product that works well and provides a quick, exciting game. The Fast Track dominates the air hockey market, with its noisy, super fast playfield. The simple act of giving it a football theme for this summer has doubled demand for our Double Fast Track. It's the fun value that sells our tables. If players build up a sweat or hone their social skills then that's a bonus, but they've got to want to play first.

So should games manufacturers take extra responsibility for the well being

of their customers? We should all feel comfortable with the effects our products have on their consumers, our own children. But personal and parental responsibility needs greater promotion as well. It's always somebody else's fault these days. Personally, I was never very good at Defender so I've always preferred to grip a cue rather than a game controller. With the dilution of competitive sport in our schools, perhaps every common room should boast a pool, hockey or soccer table, just to give our kids back that edge; how to deal equally with victory or defeat, face to face. Otherwise, experience gained in the virtual world may leave them wanting in the real one.

*With thanks to Liam Barrett and all at Sam Leisure*

### **Pablo Madariaga, design department, Billares Sam**

THERE'S no denying the sporting quality of billiards and pool. Like chess, they help youngsters to learn how to face situations with creativity and how to look for solutions by themselves. Other important aspects are the ability to make mental calculations, make judgements about angles and learn about the behaviour of the balls, the cloth and the cushions.

Billares Sam, with the co-operation of its distributors in Spain and other countries, especially the UK, has been involved for years in organising pool and billiards tournaments and supplies tables for various championships around the world.

Billares Sam helps city councils in Spain in the organisation of free sport events for youngsters in order to give them alternatives for their time off.

Now, with the new Linares football table, Billares Sam is promoting competitions in Spain. Football tables are a very common entertainment in Spain in bars and public places. Local competitions are frequent and young people are proud to play it with expertise. The game is a combination of technique and physical strength, which also requires a high level of concentration and good spacial awareness.

Finally, air hockey, the other main product manufactured by Sam, is a physically demanding game but is considered more of an entertainment. It requires less skill and its allure relies more on chance. Billares Sam enhances the game with specially designed rails (where puck direction is less predictable) and incorporating bumpers. Also, Billares Sam designed the double Fast Track, where two players can compete on each side, turning air hockey into a team game, and the Baby Air, for kids to play from an early age.

In general, Billares Sam manufactures only sporting games, where the key is competition between rivals, and not the winning of prizes or money.

*With thanks to Pablo Madariaga and all at Billares Sam*

### **Thomas Bang Torgersen, executive manager, Positive Gaming Europe**

DANCE games are probably the closest to a true sport computer game you can get. The best dancers do 15 steps per second on specific songs. Machine dance is also part of the International Dance Organisation as a new sport and dance discipline and official European and World Championships are planned under the IDO umbrella. As far as we know this is the first ever computer game to achieve an official sports status.

Machine dance is also part of ongoing research studies in the US and Norway. I attach a short report on a soon to be finished research project at the Year school in Norway where machine dance as a part of the organised school day has been a huge success.







## Project

Machine dance in Vear Primary School in Stokke, Norway.

## Background

In the western world there has been a lot of focus and attention lately on the lack of physical activity among children and youths. Reports and research show an alarming growth of obesity among the young and problems that follow because of obesity, for example diabetes.

Enough physical exercise and activity is necessary for normal growth and development of physical qualities like co-ordination, strength, endurance, mobility, development of the bone structure and more. The effects of physical exercise are also positive for mental health and increased physical activity can therefore contribute to stress mastering and less depression among children and young adults. Children with good co-ordination skills are less likely to be bullied and will make friends easier.

One of the main spare time activities of children and young adults today is playing computer games - sometimes for hours on end. This is considered part of the problem of rising obesity among children and young adults.

Now there is a new computer game trend to challenge the traditional view on the negative effects of too much computer game playing - machine dance.

Machine dance (In The Groove) is a computer game where players use their legs and dance (step) to the rhythm of music on a dance platform in front of a screen. The screen gives the dancer instructions through arrows on how the dancer should step next. This challenges the dancer physically (co-ordination and endurance) and mentally (concentration and focus). Machine dance also teaches the dancer to perform in front of other people, which helps boost self confidence.

There are different difficulty levels on every song, so anyone can find a challenge. Machine dance is now an official dance and sport under the International Dance Organisation, which has over 70 member countries.

## Project background

Physiotherapist Inger Marie Solberg in Stokke in co-operation with Positive Gaming wanted to see how machine dance could be used in a school environment to increase the physical activity level among children. Machine dance is a new, exciting and challenging school activity that could inspire all, but especially those who usually don't participate in ordinary sports activities.

## Project group

Pupil representatives, teachers, inspectors, culture office, Positive Gaming.

## Project research topics

- 1) How can machine dance contribute to increased physical activity especially for groups that are usually inactive?
- 2) How can machine dance be used in a school environment as a tool to stimulate and motivate children and young adults to make a better internal class environment?

## Project findings so far

- General positive effects on both the general physical activity level and the class environment.
- Better concentration.

# The positives of video gaming

WITH the birth of Pong, video games came kicking and screaming into the world a little more than 30 years ago. Today, video games are on the verge of earning their place as a bona fide form of culture to stand alongside music, art and literature. Indeed, like some cultural teenager, video games are currently viewed as a real threat to the status quo.

Listen to the establishment, politicians, newspapers, the Church, etc., and you'd be forgiven for thinking video games were solely responsible for modern society's sexism, violence, racism and homophobia. Ironically, video games are fighting back. As the genre embarks on adulthood and mainstream acceptance, video games are changing into the bunch of do-gooders of which even the self-appointed guardians of all that is worthy and true would approve. The positive physical, social and mental influence of video games is growing.

## Getting physical

The world is fat. Over 300 million adults around the world are overweight. One quarter of Middle Eastern adults are obese; in Japan and the UK, twice as many men are obese today compared to 1980. In the US in 2004, nine states had obesity rates of over 25 per cent while the consequences of obesity - diabetes, heart disease and hypertension - are out of control.

Help is at hand (and feet) from a breed of new kinaesthetic video games as Konami's Dance Dance Revolution and the like provide exercise for a generation of kids who go to the arcade to hang out with their friends. Were proof needed of the impact, consider that Los Angeles' Patrick Henry Middle School has introduced DDR into its gym class. "They just don't want to leave it alone. It's a good exercise for them," noted coach Chad Fenwick.

"Compared to a Stairmaster or jogging, you can burn just as many calories. The machines also teach things like balance, timing and co-ordination. The key is to get them interested in getting physically fit and staying that way for life. It's what it's all about."

The influx of video game technology in gymnasiums remains a market to be fully exploited. During the nineties, a number of companies developed exercise equipment that combined video games with stationary bicycles or treadmills. But health clubs shied away from them because they were far more expensive than conventional equipment and weren't interesting enough to draw gamers into gyms.

However, Body Games by American Jonah Warren is an interesting way to combine the two. A player can affect a trio of Body Game's outcomes by using his or her body, free of wires and controllers. The user's silhouette is extracted from a video image and projected in front of him/her. The silhouette can then interact with graphic game objects such as moving coloured blocks and balls.

The relationship with video games doesn't have to be direct. Couch potatoes are being encouraged to get up and get out so that they can play massive, multiplayer role-playing games such as Everquest. Gymnasiums are creating tie-ins between real services and virtual worlds to reinforce good behaviour, awarding character strength and agility points in Everquest as fitness goals are reached and taking them away if athletes abandon their exercise regime.

## Social scene

Everquest is just one example of the way companies are using video games in an innovative way, establishing a link between virtual and real life and creating a social network of gamers that stands at odds with the perception of lone players in darkened rooms.

The growth of games designed to promote collectivism, not confrontation, is coming to the fore. A 2003 PEW Internet and American Life Project report questioned 1,200 students at 27 institutes of higher education and found that gaming is leading toward interaction as a routine component of entertainment. Students found gaming had a positive impact on their



social lives. One in five respondents said video games helped them make friends and improve their existing friendships and almost half (46 per cent) reported that they played multiplayer games.

If further evidence were needed, why not take the word of the Lord? Even the Church is using video games' social relevancy to get its message across. The console-based Bible Game pitched as 'fun for all the family' and designed to be played as a group, mixes 1,500 questions from the Old Testament with games and challenges including Noah's Ark, David and Goliath and Walls of Jericho. The Bible Game might be destined for the discount section of your local Woolworths, but the very existence of the title shows the way video games are being used as an educational tool and taking the genre toward tolerance and even acceptance.

### Going mental

While video games are developing a physical and social edge, they are also being used to build, repair and maintain a whole host of mental skills.

Researchers in the US are using a helmet developed by NASA to help children with attention-deficit disorder. The helmet is linked to a specially designed video game and measures when children are in an alert and non-alert state. Success in the video game is dependent on the player's focus. The more a player is focused, the faster the speeds or the higher the distances the player's character reaches. When players lose focus their character's performance suffers. As well as increased concentration, the game has proven results in increased memory and subject's level of independent play. Helmet inventor Dr Alan Pope commented: "The traditional means of measuring attention-deficit disorder is boring. Subject drop out was a real problem. The kids that have video games treatment physically drag their parents along."

In the UK, video games are being used by Nottingham University to work on amblyopia or lazy eye. Instead of the traditional route, wearing an eye patch for around 400 hours to improve the neural connection of the weaker eye, the university has developed a 3D game that sends images, cars and obstacles to both eyes alternately. Initial trials showed the video game strategy to have the same effects as the 400-hour treatment in just one hour!

Butch Rosser, known as the 'Nintendo Surgeon,' at Beth Israel Medical Centre New York, conducted research that found that doctors who spent at least three hours a week playing video games made 37 per cent less mistakes in laparoscopic surgery and performed the task 27 per cent faster than their counterparts who did not play video games. Rosser tested subjects on a surgical training exercise known as Top Gun on game playing and non-game playing surgeons.

The evidence is conclusive. The influence of video games is being felt in every part of modern life from the classroom to the gymnasium to the operating theatre to the motorway and even to the pulpit. Video games are the most exciting, limitless, fast moving and influential medium in modern society. Video games are changing, growing and developing in unpredictable directions.

Politicians talking of limiting, banning and regulating video games beyond other entertainment media such as books or movies, have shown their views to be misguided at best. Video games affect us all in a myriad of incredibly positive ways.

*This part of the feature supplied by Paul Reaney at ATEI, [www.ateonline.co.uk](http://www.ateonline.co.uk)*



- Better co-ordination.
- Better self confidence because of the feeling of mastery. The game is simple and pupils quickly become better.
- Better group process. The pupils have to co-operate and help each other.
- The pupils are using their energy in a positive way and are more focused and relaxed in classes afterwards.
- Better endurance.

### How the machine dance project was introduced to Year School and classes.

#### Step 1

The teacher and machine dance trainer picks two to four pupils in the class. They pick preferably pupils that need a self-confidence boost and more attention. They receive weekly training in the dance game In The Groove and together with the machine dance trainer and the teacher they work out a plan on how they are to introduce to the rest of the class. This goes on for one to two months.

#### Step 2

Machine dance is then introduced to the rest of the class. The elected two to four pupils become the teachers for the other pupils.

#### Step 3

The teacher can then use machine dance exercise as rewards during classes. More specific goals can be set on how to improve each individual in the different songs and on different difficulty levels.

#### Step 4

Project evaluation.

*With thanks to Thomas Bang Torgersen and all at Positive Gaming Europe*

### Marc Haim, president, R H Belam Company

YOU have posed an interesting question; what level of social responsibility should the amusement industry accept in its quest to be a responsible participant in modern civilisation. As the standards of the world evolve, do all industries have to evolve and keep up to date?

It seems to me that we as an industry have three different masters, and we must satisfy all three to survive. Firstly, we must satisfy our customers, the players of our products, who pour the life-giving cash into our industries. If we do not entertain them, they will not pay, and then we have no business.

Are we responsible to prevent obesity, to promote good health, to foster physical exertion, etc? I think not, in the same way book publishers and movie producers have no such burden. Of course, if players want those types of entertainment, some of our manufacturers should strive to offer it.

Are we responsible for encouraging good social behaviour, for discouraging objectionable behaviour such as street fighting or gun violence or thievery, or to promote some moral goal such as prayer or abstinence or school attendance? I think not specifically. We must remember that one man's evils are not so bad to another and perfectly good to a third. While we must respect the mores of society, it is not wrong to poke fun at or entertain in pro and contra fashions.